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EDUCATION

Missouri teachers are eligible for COVID-19 vaccines next week. But how many will take it?

Claudette Riley, Springfield News-Leader

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Teachers across Missouri have clamored for access to the COVID-19 vaccine but when they become eligible — starting Monday — it is unclear how many will actually sign up to get the shot.

A recent survey by Missouri State University researchers showed just 63 percent wanted to be inoculated as soon the vaccine was available.

An additional 20 percent said they want to get the vaccine but only when they feel it is safe, a feeling experts believe will grow along with the millions of doses distributed so far.

However 15 percent of the 7,779 educators who responded from all over the Show-Me State said they did not believe in vaccines or did not trust the methods used to develop the COVID-19 vaccine.

The MSU survey showed educators in rural districts were, on average, less trusting of the vaccine than educators in suburban or urban districts.

More: Missouri teachers, 'essential workers' eligible for COVID-19 vaccine starting March 15

National surveys showed American's willingness to get the vaccine rose in early 2021, hovering between 60 and 71 percent, even though pockets of intense distrust continue to show up.

The MSU survey showed interest among teachers is actually higher — up to 83 percent — including the 63 percent who want it as soon as it's available and the 20 percent who want it as soon as the vaccine is deemed safe.

The high level of interest is not a surprise to Paul Katnik, assistant commissioner of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, or DESE.

"All the teacher groups that we talk to, they're just waiting for their turn," Katnik told the News-Leader this week. "They feel like (the vaccine) is the best way for them to be safe themselves but also to create a safe environment for their students, which of course is always front-of-mind for them."

Gov. Mike Parson, under pressure from state education groups, recently announced K-12 employees will be eligible to get the vaccine starting March 15.

The original timeline was mid-April.

In February, the leaders of the Missouri National Education Association and the Missouri State Teachers Association, among others, sent letters to the governor. They urged him to prioritize teachers on the vaccine eligibility list.

More: 5 things to know about COVID-19 vaccine distribution at CoxHealth, in Greene Co.

"Seeing the timeline for vaccination accelerated by a month is good news to educators. We hope the Governor and his team will continue to accelerate access to vaccination for all educators and critical workers," said MNEA President Phil Murray. "The governor's action is supported by science and is in the best interests of all Missourians."

Murray added: "Educators, students, and parents have done their part; our schools have been open since the beginning of the school year using hybrid or virtual instruction to support students."

Teacher vaccine eligibility a 'layer of protection'

Mallory McGowin, chief communications officer for DESE, said state education officials are excited about the upcoming vaccine eligibility. She called it an "important layer of protection" for teachers and support staff.

"The other mitigation strategies being used in schools right now — social distancing, masking, an emphasis on hand hygiene — all of that should continue even after the second dose in the two-shot (vaccine) series is received," she said. "It's those mitigation efforts that have showed that transmission of the virus is really low in schools."

McGowin pointed to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance that schools should not wait until all employees are vaccinated before reopening.

"The vaccine is not a prerequisite for in-person learning," McGowin said. " ... Those other mitigation strategies in place prior to vaccine availability were showing that they were very effective at keeping schools and in person learning a safe option."

Following the governor's announcement about vaccine eligibility, DESE notified districts of the ability to adjust the learning schedule — or move to virtual or "alternative method of instruction" days — to accommodate mass vaccination clinics for employees.

"We've provided every flexibility that we can," she said. "We made it clear to schools that they could use one of the Alternative Methods of Instruction days."

McGowin said those options are also possible if there is a "staffing issue" due to a large number of employees experiencing side effects to the vaccine.

As of Thursday, a map tracking public schools in Missouri, showed all but 25 systems — 16 charter schools and nine districts — were offering in person instruction at least part of the week. None of the fully virtual systems were in southwest Missouri.

Springfield, the largest district in the state, will shift in-person learning from four days a week to five days a week for all students currently on the hybrid learning schedule. The change will start March 22.

More: Noel Tyson chicken plant, site of summer COVID-19 outbreak, vaccinates 79 workers

COVID-19 vaccine survey results

In early February, the survey from MSU researchers Jon Turner, Ximena Uribe-Zarain, Kennedy Ongaga and Kelly Wynne went out to all public school educators in Missouri who have an email on file.

Nearly 8,000 responded to the anonymous survey from Feb. 9-16, which will serve as a basis for the quartet's research into the impact of the pandemic on K-12 educators.

As part of the survey, they asked: "If offered for free of charge, would you get vaccinated for COVID-19?"

Turner, associate professor of educational leadership, said the response to that question was released early.

"We knew the timeliness," he said "It was something we were interested and curious about."

There were 7,779 responses to the question. Here is a breakdown of the answers:

1 percent — No, I do not believe in vaccines (94)

14 percent — No, I do not trust the methods used to develop the COVID-19 vaccine. (1,073)

20 percent — Yes, when I feel it is a safe option (1,586)

63 percent — Yes, as soon as it is available to me (4,913)

1 percent — I would like to get the vaccine, but I am unable to receive it due to health reasons (113)

The survey asked for demographic information. Of the more than 4,900 who wanted the vaccine as soon as it was available, here was the breakdown:

Nearly 51 percent were from suburban districts

33 percent were from rural districts

Nearly 16 percent were from urban districts

Of the 94 who responded they did not "believe in vaccines" 57 percent hailed from rural districts, 29 percent from suburban, and 14 percent from urban.

The demographic showed 63 were classroom teachers, 23 were content specialists (such as art, music, special education or physical education), one was a librarian, two were counselors, two were building-level administrators and one was a district-level administrator. There were two others that did not fit into one of those categories.

The story continues below.

Of the 1,073 individuals who were not planning to take it because they did not trust the methods used to develop the vaccine, 62 percent were from rural districts, 27 percent were from suburban districts and the rest were from urban districts.

The job category breakdown for that question included 14 percent classroom teachers, 15

percent content specialists, 9 percent librarians, 12 percent counselors, 11 percent building-level administrators, 8 percent district-level administrators and the rest were in the other category.

Claudette Riley is the education reporter for the News-Leader. Email news tips to criley@news-leader.com.